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ABSTRACT

The prime function of human communication is to enable people to survive their environment. The special function of an argument is to adjust the environment to satisfy felt needs. Whether argument takes the cognitive form of thought, the textual form of an essay, or the interpersonal form of a conversation, it serves this general function. Specific functions of an argument include claim, data, warrant, objection, support, and qualification. These functions assume identity in cognitive, textual, and interpersonal argumentation. For example, the primary function of claim assumes a belief in cognitive form, a proposition in textual form, and an utterance in interpersonal form. The target of an argument may be one's self, a nonpresent other, or a conversational partner. The functional theory of argument views the function to be the same in all three forms--to adjust the environment to satisfy felt needs. Therefore, the three forms of argument are not different things, rather they are different types of the same thing. (HOD)

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THE FUNCTIONS OF ARGUMENT, INTERPERSONAL AND OTHERWISE

By

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Abstract

This paper suggests a functional theory of argument. The overall function of argument is asserted to be adjusting the environment to meet felt needs. The functions of argument's components are claim, data, warrant, objecting, supporting and qualifying. These functions retain their identity in cognitive, textual and interpersonal argumentation. Therefore, the present functional approach is presented as unifying our presently disparate notions of what an argument is.

Presented to the seminar on interpersonal argument at the Speech Communication Association convention in Louisville, Kentucky, in November 1982.

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THE FUNCTIONS OF ARGUMENT, INTERPERSONAL AND OTHERWISE

This paper presents an initial outline of a functional theory of argument. It takes its cue from the functional psychology which originated in America in the first years of this century. That school of thought has been sufficiently liberal in scope that it continues as the dominant point of view in psychology today (see Carr, 1930; Heidbreder, 1933, ch. 6, Boring, 1957, ch. 22; McKinney, 1978; Marx & Hillix, 1979, ch. 5). Functionalism was inspired by Darwin's exciting theory, and began as a reaction against the sterile structuralism of Wundt and Titchener (see Heidbreder, 1933, ch. 4; Marx & Hillix, 1979, ch. 4; Lindenfeld, 1978; Lindberg, 1979; Rappard, Sanders & de Swart, 1980). The structuralists' goal was to give a strict scientific description of consciousness experiencing sensation. They were analytical in the harshest sense: seeking the most elementary components of sensation, they held that meanings and feelings were inferential and so unacceptable as scientific data. The careful introspective accounts of sensation produced in the structuralists' labs were stripped of all but the most atomistic descriptions of psychophysical reactions (see Boring, 1953; structuralists, however, did not confine themselves to introspective data, as Danziger, 1980 shows). Functionalists wanted to study more than psychophysical sensation, and so used a much less constrained introspective methodology. They wanted to know what consciousness <u>is for</u>, not merely what it <u>is</u>. Functionalism encompassed the structural program, but went further. Consciousness was seen as having survival value in Darwin's sense: it helps the human species adapt to its environment. Consciousness therefore has a <u>use</u>; it is <u>for</u> something. Working from this first principle, functionalists went on to study the functions of various human abilities and behaviors. The distinguishing question in functionalism is about the use of a thing; more specifically, a functionalist will wonder how a phenomenon helps or hinders the organism in dealing with its surround.

Joining this tradition, this paper's ambition is to describe argument functionally. The first effort will be to generate a profile of argument, considered as an undifferentiated entity. Next I will decompose it, and study how its elements contribute to its overall function. Each component will be shown to have its own distinct use. The next section of the paper indicates how those functions are manifest in argument, whether it is situated textually, cognitively or interpersonally. Thus the notion of function is shown to unify our several disparate descriptions of argument. The closing section remarks upon this advantage, and attends to the limitations of telic theory.

The Function(s) of Argument

Various thinkers have nominated quite a few functions for argument, rhetoric or communication. For our present purposes, to find a single function would be ideal, so long as it does not exclude any important uses of argument. Before starting our necessarily cursory examination of some of the main candidates, however, we should notice that one thing can be said to have several functions, which differ in their level of abstraction according to the point of view taken by the theorist. "The" function of the ability to eat, for instance, might be to give the organism pleasure, to give it energy, to give it material for growth, to allow it to survive. Some arbitrariness in the assignment of function is therefore unavoidable. Therefore, I will strive here for a fairly high level of generality (so thay we may end up with one function), but I do not insist that this analysis is necessarily better than any others.

Aristotle taught that rhetoric has four uses (Rhetoric, I.1). Through rhetoric, truth and justice will prevail if their advocate is reasonably competent. Rhetoric is also a means by which conviction may be induced within "people whom one cannot instruct." Furthermore, practice in sophistry helps one to see the other side of an issue, enabling one to plan so that trust will not be unfairly surprised in a dispute. Finally, rhetoric is a means of self-defense. In

generalizing all this, Aristotle says explicitly that rhetoric's "function is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the means of coming as near such success as the circumstances of each particular case allow." But of each of these uses for rhetoric we might reasonably ask, "why is this useful to the organism?" Why, for instance, would one want to find truth? To defend oneself? On Aristotle's analysis, rhetoric is a means to various ends, and it is those ends we must collect if we are to know the function of argument.

After Aristotle's list, perhaps the next most important discussion of communication functions is given by Dance (most elaborately in Dance & Larson, 1976). Dance, after reviewing a number of fairly miscellaneous lists of communication functions, settles on three. The first is to link the individual with his/her environment, which includes other people. Secondly, communication serves a mentation function--that is, it develops our minds. Lastly, human behavior is regulated by communication. Of these three functions, Dance (1978; 1982) insists on the theoretical priority of mentation, on the grounds that it is the most uniquely human feature of human communication. Interestingly, his argument is couched in evolutionary terms reminiscent of traditional functionalism (see Dance, 1978, esp. pp. 17-18). Dance's treatment of what communication is for comes closer than Aristotle's to the level of abstraction needed here. Dance's orientation seems to be more organismic and fundamental than Aristotle's.

Brief as this discussion has been, certain points are beginning to emerge. Culture-linked functions are too specific, too idiosyncratic, to serve us properly. A small stretch of imagination enables us to envision a culture which does not especially value truth-seeking, persuasion or verbal self-defense, but surely communication would continue to function, even in such a brute, piratical society. We must focus on the human organism and its struggle for survival. To say, as Dance does, that communication links the individual and his/her environment is a start, but "link" is a peculiarly passive expression of this relationship.

Through communication, the individual tries to exercise mastery over his/her surround. Could we not speak, there would be hardly a can opener in all of North America.

The prime function of human communication, it seems to me, is therefore to enable people to survive their environment. In a particular culture, this value might be manifest in court or in dissertation defenses, in shouts coordinating mastadon assaults or in sexual repartee. Linking, mentation and regulation are all essential but subordinate to the execution of the prime function.

But so far, I have only been discussing communication, not argument in particular. As a species of communication, we might reasonably expect arguing to carry out the prime function, and so it does. but arguing is a special kind of communication, and it therefore serves us in a specific way.

I think it is no accident that argumentation has been so often associated with the verb "to move." Arguments move people, both literally and metaphorically. We commonly say that an argument moves from premises to conclusion, from need to plan, from one belief to another. Argument moves things, transmutes threats into treaties, sets aside obstacles, clears paths, energizes behavior. However, argument is not like a rogue elephant, persuading everyone on every topic; it is selective and must be stimulated. Peirce says that doubt "stimulates us to action until it is destroyed," and likens this to the way irritation of a nerve calls forth a reflex action (1958, p. 99). Mechanism aside, argument too must be stimulated. Only a felt need--a doubt, an uncertainty (Brockriede, 1975), an affront, an unmet drive--will loose arguments on the environment with the aim of altering it. So the special function of argument is to adjust the environment to satisfy felt needs. This statement of argument's function is abstract enough to be organismic and broad enough to encompass the ideas of Aristotle, Dance and others. Whether argument takes the cognitive form

of thought, the textual form of an essay or the interpersonal form of a converstion, it serves this general function.

Functions Within Argument

We may carry our functional analysis a step further by asking how it is that an argument pursues its object. This question requires that we first do a structural description of argument (recall that historically functionalism absorbed structuraiism--the functionalists were always perfectly willing to accept the structuralists' data, as far as it went). Once having identified the componenets of argument, we can then explore the way they work together within argument. In other words, we will ask the functionalists' question of each component: what is it for?

Actually, I have already written a paper which is more or less directed to these issues (Hample, 1977). The thesis of that essay is that the Toulmin model considered functionally amounts to a series of hypothetical syllogisms. That earlier claim needs only minor recasting to fit here.

The three most basic functions are what Toulmin (1958) calls claim, data and warrant. While it may not be possible in practice to inspect a particular statement and be certain that it is, say, a warrant, all the functions must somehow be carried out in a full argument. The function of a claim is to announce the specific environmental change desired by the arguer. It is the point of the argument--something that someone ought to think or do differently. The data function is to support the claim by providing acceptable information which can be linked to the conclusion. This linking is the responsibility of the warrant, which always has the function (though rarely the form) of "if data then claim." Though one or more of these functions may not be obvious in an enthymeme, they are each essential if a thing is to be called an argument. It is no more reasonable to label an unconnected data and claim a bad argument

than it is to say that a piece of rawhide and a steak are a bad cow.

This basic unit of proof--data, warrant, claim--is often fleshed out by three additional but coordinated arguments, giving us three subordinate functions. One of these is the objecting unit. Toulmin says that reservations are directed against warrants; thus, if the reservation is true, the (original) warrant is not. As I claimed in the earlier paper, the reservation must be tested with data in order to have any force. So the objecting unit also has the structure of data, warrant, claim: "data (for the reservation); if the data are true then the original warrant is not; so the original warrant is false."

The three basic functions also constitute the second optional unit, the supportive one. Toulmin's model includes backing to support the warrant. Backing is data-like, and the warrant obviously serves a claim function in this argument. My earlier essay insists that a supplementary warrant is also required, giving: "backing; if backing is true then the warrant is true; so the warrant is true." The original data may also be supported by a subordinate argument as well.

A third optional use for the data, warrant, claim system is to qualify a claim. Any component of an argument may use a modal qualifier, in my view, and the effects of these are cumulative (actually, in my own model, they are multiplicative, but I will not insist on the exact mathematical form in this general account). So, we might have: "data; if the data are true then the claim is probably true; so the claim is probably true." Or: "perhaps the data are true; if the data are only perhaps true then the claim is probably not; so the claim is probably false." Any argument, including supportive or objecting ones, may make use of qualification. In Toulmin's original model, qualification seems to be essentially a function of what I have here called the objecting unit. Of all the functions I have discussed in this paper, I am least sure that qualifying deserves to be separate. One might plausibly

say that this is an extremely subordinate function which is really done by a suitably altered argument unit which has another main aim--supporting or objecting, for instance. But even if the reader feels that qualification ought not be a distinct function, my analysis is only simplified, not endangered.

An argument, then, necessarily includes a central data, warrant, claim unit, and optionally may also have one or more subordinate units. All of the components will be coordinated and focused on the central claim. The three basic functions can replicate indefinitely, creating complex series of arguments. This leads to an awkwardness in usage: the central argument, the optional units, and the combination of all of them are all properly called arguments, due to the defining actions of the three functional components. Notice, too, that the contact between linked arguments is a shared component, which has different functions in the two arguments (e.g., the claim from a supportive argument may serve as the warrant in the central argument).

So we have a system of arguments (perhaps we should call this a discourse) which consists of one or more sets of the three functions. The links within the system are done at the component level, not the more abstract functional one. As with any system, we find in argument a number of attributes (see Littlejohn, 1978, ch. 2, for these features of a system): wholeness (an argument fulfills its own function only if the data, warrant and claim functions are interactively satisfied within it); interdependence (the identity of each of the three component-functions of an argument is critically influenced by that of the other two); hierarchy (the optional units are subordinate to the central one, and the data and warrant are subordinate to the claim); self-regulation and control (once the claim is set, the rest of the argument steers toward it, adapting to objections and concessions encountered en route); interchange with environment (the materials of the argument must be supplied from outside the argument, and the argument is targeted on some external object); equilibrium

(the constructive elements of the central argument must be capable of adapting to objections if the central claim is to prove satisfactory); change and adaptability (an argument can deal with many kinds of challenges and use a wide variety of components; it can change in response to support or refutation attempts); and equifinality (there are many ways to prove any given claim). Function and system are closely related ideas in social theory (see Chafetz, 1978), and so argument-as-system is a notion which grows readily out of the present functional approach.

Avatars of Argument

The data, warrant and claim functions are the only defining features of argument. The components which carry out these functions may be paragraphs of an essay, turns at talk, or thoughts. These three possibilities correspond loosely to what O'Keefe (1977) has called argument$_1$ and argument$_2$, and what I have called argument$_0$ (Hample, 1982). The burden of this section is to show that the same functions appear in every incarnation of argument.

Table 1 shows the correspondence among the three most important avatars of argument: argument as private reasoning, as a static public document, and

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INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

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as interpersonal communication. The table is constructed with labels which attempt to exaggerate the differences between the three settings, and some of those differences in functional description are little more than cosmetic. But the less distinct the settings appear in the body of the table, the more support I claim for my argument that all three are the same kind of thing. To the degree that a functional description of the components from one column could just as easily have been in a different column, setting is transparent to this theory of argument.

For the most part, the table's differences simply reflect the different manifestations of the argument. Components of thought-contained arguments will be beliefs, those of textually constituted arguments will be sentences or porpositions, and the elements of interpersonal arguments will be utterances or turns at talk. This physical difference between the arguments explains many of the distinctions in the table. The other main difference is in the physicality of the argument's target. One may argue with self, with a non-present other, or with a conversational partner. Thus an arguer reconsiders for self but adapts to another, and this has implications for self-presentation during the argument.

Given that the arguments and their audiences are physically different in $argument_0$, $argument_1$ and $argument_2$, the arguments' components will also be different physically. But as Table 1 seems to indicate, the functions of argument are almost exactly the same in all three processes. From this emerges the important conclusion that $argument_0$, $argument_1$ and $argument_2$ are not different things; they are different types of the same thing.

The final practical test of this conclusion will occur over time, as we see whether researchers need more than these few functions to study argument, and whether they need clearly different functions for special cases. A position paper is no place to try to anticipate all the ways argument might be analyzed, but I can at least express my reductionist faith that all structural or functional analyses of the components of (any kind of) argument can be assimilated into Table 1. My own work on cognitive argument is fully compatible with this functional theory. For textual argument, my earlier analysis of Toulmin's essentially text-based theory affords a presumption that the table is reasonably complete. Conversations have been viewed as enthymemes by a number of scholars (see Jackson & Jacobs, 1980; Nofsinger, 1976; Bowers, Elliott & Desmond, 1977), suggesting application of this functional scheme in that arena as well.

In closing this section, I cannot resist making one more systems-related point: that, in some circumstances, it is appropriate to regard argument$_0$ as nested within argument$_1$, which can in turn be subordinate to argument$_2$. A person in a conversation may think of an argument$_0$ as the basis for production of an argument$_1$, which may combine with other utterances to constitute an argument$_2$. As before, a particular component of one argument, even when suitably manifest in a new physical form, may serve a different function at each level. For example, a person may generate an argument$_0$ to test a claim, use that former claim as data in a self-contaned argument$_1$, and have that argument$_1$ serve an objecting function in an argument$_2$. This theoretically convenient nesting may not always occur in practice, of course--a person may simply think through an argument$_0$ and never express it--but its potential exhibits the principle of hierarchy once more. It also makes clear that the question of priority--which type of argument is most important?--depends for its answer on the scholar's perspective more than anything else.

Conclusions

We are too small a speciality to survive much further specialization. We have for several years been speaking and writing as though argument$_1$ and argument$_2$ were radically different things. This emphasis was forgivable in O'Keefe's original paper (in which he really never says exactly what it is that we have two senses of), but the longer this distinction remains oversharp in our thinking, the more we endanger our own disciplinary unity. These various kinds of arguments really <u>are</u> different, of course, and deserve to be studied with different methods and in connection with different theories. But at one level, at least, everything ought to come together.

Lastly, let me say that a solely functional theory, being merely teleological, does not provide a complete scientific account of anything. A

function does not cause a behavior; a use does not call a phenomenon into being; a goal is not an effect; a function is different from a rule. We should not be satisfied with any solely functional theories, including the one I have outlined here. The thoughts I have expressed doe not constitute a description of everything we need to know about argument. But though the theory's own domain is modest, I think its sphere of applicability is not.

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Table 1

Various Manifestations of Argument Functions

Argument Type:	$Argument_0$	$Argument_1$	$Argument_2$
Typical Form:	Thought	Text	Conversation
Functions			
Primary			
Claim	Belief	Proposition	Utterance
Data	Previous Beliefs	Accepted Information	Other's Statements/ Concessions/ Unchallenged Assertions
Warrant	Belief-Belief Relationship	Proposition-Proposition Relationship	Utterance-Utterance Relationship
Supplementary			
Objection	Reconsideration/Test	Adaptation to Audience/Display of Two-Sidedness	Adaptation to Other/ Show Respect for Other/Test
Support	Elaboration/ Backtracking	Fortification/ Adaptation to Audience	Cooperation/Clarification/ Establishment of Agreements
Qualification	Acheivement of Accuracy/Rentention of Flexibility	Adaptation to Audience/Show Moderation, Fairmindedness/ Acheivement of Accuracy	Disclaimer/Minor Concession/Show Moderation, Fairmindedness/Acheivement of Accuracy